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SUBJECT: PROGRESSIVE KINGMAKERS: STILL UNDECIDED ON 2007
CANDIDATE

REF: SEOUL 1479

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Roh Moo-hyun and former President Kim Dae-jung are the kingmakers on the progressive side of Korean politics, but with fewer than 200 days to go until the December 19 election, neither has made clear whom he supports for president. Meanwhile, on the conservative side, either Lee Myung-bak or Park Geun-hye will likely be the GNP candidate. This suggests that the progressive side has considerable ground to make up, but allegiances are still unclear and there is no progressive front runner. END SUMMARY.

FIVE YEARS AGO

2. (SBU) In April 2002, current President Roh Moo-hyun had already secured the New Millennium Democratic Party's (MDP) nomination for president. In June 2002, President Kim Dae-jung (DJ) was embroiled in a scandal about his third son, who had just been imprisoned for illegal political fund-raising. At that time, DJ's approval rating was sinking into the single digits due to multiple scandals and general disappointment in his administration. This was highlighted by the MDP's defeat in the June 13, 2002 national elections. DJ had little credibility and, while he played a key role in helping Roh to the MDP candidacy, by June, DJ had taken a back seat to candidate Roh. Former President Kim Young-sam was not an influential figure as he was remembered most in 2002 as being responsible for the 1997-8 Asian financial crisis that shook Korea's economy. Lee Hoi-chang was picked as the GNP candidate in early May 2002 -- by June 2002, the campaign was squarely focused on the two candidates and the sitting and former presidents were lame ducks.

FIVE YEARS LATER

3. (SBU) Today, the progressives are far from choosing a candidate as multiple groups are jockeying for position and hoping to secure public support (reftel). Currently, only former GNP candidate Sohn Hak-kyu receives more than 5 percent support (he receives between 4 and 6 percent depending on the poll). With no dominant progressive candidate, President Roh and Former President Kim Dae-jung

(DJ) are the key progressive figures. The top five progressive candidates support rates combined amount to roughly 10 percent and the Uri Party's approval rate hovers around 10 percent. Therefore, without Roh and DJ's intervention and support, the outlook for any progressive candidate is not bright.

KIM DAE-JUNG BEAUTY CONTEST

¶4. (SBU) Former President Kim Dae-jung (DJ) has emerged as the elder statesman who must be consulted for all progressive candidates. He is such a key figure that President Roh Moo-hyun visited DJ at his home in November 2006, an unprecedented move for a sitting president. There is widespread speculation about the content of the meeting. Some pundits speculate the two made a pact to work together to field a competitive candidate this year.

¶5. (SBU) Uri Chairman Chung Se-kyun met with DJ on May 30, and progressive presidential hopefuls and party leaders - including Chung Dong-young (May 26), Park Sang-chon (May 29), Sohn Hak-kyu (May 20), Kim Han-gill (May 28), Lee Hae-chan (May 30), Kim Hyuk-kyu (May 25), Han Myeong-sook (June 7) and Kim Geun-tae -- have been queuing up to call on DJ in the last month to seek his advice and support. While former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn is seen by many as DJ's preferred choice, most concede that DJ would back any candidate who could compete against the GNP. On June 7, following DJ's meeting with Han and former DP Chairman Jang Song, DJ told reporters that the candidate who did the most to achieve a grand progressive coalition should receive people's support as the candidate.

ROH MOO-HYUN - 2007 OR 2008?

¶6. (SBU) After sinking in January to as low as five percent, Roh's popularity has reached as high as 35 percent in recent polls. Roh will likely not be able to maintain this level of popularity, but his new-found support and the lack of any scandals could allow him to play a key role in this year's presidential race throughout the campaign. Roh's June 2 speech to his supporters where he lashed out at the GNP and even some progressive candidates violated election law, according to a June 7 ruling by the Central Election Commission. He said that if the GNP won, "it would cause him to shudder in horror." Many pundits assume Roh hoped to solidify his core supporters with the controversial speech. The violation of the election law will not result in official reprimand, though if Roh appeals the violation, it could continue to be a political issue.

¶7. (SBU) While Roh's influence is unquestionably substantial, his goal remains unclear. In a May 30 speech at a balanced national development seminar in Pohang city, Roh hinted at his continued political activity even after his term in office, saying, "I am about to retire to my hometown. As someone who has earned much know-how in politics and in policy-making, why would I do so? I am still young. Were it not for the laws, I may even run for the president once again without being considered too old. But I am retiring. It is out of my moral obligation as someone who pursued a balanced national development all along." Some pundits contend Roh seeks to put another progressive in the Blue House at any cost, while others contend Roh's main goal is to create a new party of his loyalists to compete in the April 2008 National Assembly elections.

¶8. (SBU) Several Blue House sources told poloff that Roh backs former PM Lee Hae-chan to succeed him. Pundits have alternatively reported that Roh supports Lee, former PM Han Myeong-sook, and former Gyeongsang Governor and former American Citizen Kim Hyuk-kyu. While Rhyu Simin, former Health and Welfare Minister and current lawmaker, has designs on the Blue House, he will likely wait until 2012 to run

according to press reports and National Assembly sources. Other political analysts even speculate that only if the GNP candidate wins the presidency would Roh's political future be assured, since Roh's message and political style are better suited to the underdog, opposition role.

CONSERVATIVE KINGMAKERS -- IN THE BACKGROUND

¶9. (SBU) Former President Kim Young-sam (YS) has not achieved DJ-like status for the conservative camp. On March 13, YS attended Lee Myung-bak's book publication ceremony and has since publicly and informally supported Lee Myung-bak. Former PM Kim Jong-pil, who still holds some influence in Choong Chung Provinces -- known as Korea's New Hampshire because they predict the electoral outcome -- has recently appeared at Park Geun-hye political events. While these two political warriors hold some influence, since Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye attract the spotlight on their own, YS and JP, as much as they would like, will not likely play the king (or queen) maker role this year.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Newly formed Moderate Unified Democratic Party (MUD) Co-Chairman Park Sang-chon said that it was time to "wean ourselves from DJ's teat," and form a political coalition separate from Roh, former Uri Chairman Chung Dong-young and DJ. While Park and others would like to chart a new, progressive course independent from DJ and Roh, with no dynamic leaders on the scene and little public support, it is unlikely that turning away from Roh and/or DJ will be an effective strategy. With fewer than 200 days until the presidential election, kingmakers President Roh and DJ are the two players to watch on the progressive side while erstwhile candidates Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye are the two to watch in the conservative camp.
STANTON